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## BEN BUTLER AND THE "STOLEN SPOONS"

THE DOCUMENTS IN THE CASE, FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED  
"PRIVATE AND OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE"

BY WILLIAM DANA ORCUTT

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It is a tribute to the personality of any man to have so impressed himself upon his generation that the mere mention of his name twenty-five years after his death revives the animosities of his period and stimulates antagonistic comment on the part of a later generation which has known him only by hearsay.

I was walking past the State House in Boston with a friend, and glancing from the anti-climax of the gilded dome to the grotesque statue of General Banks I innocently remarked: "They never succeeded in getting a statue of Butler erected there, did they?"

"Why should they?" my friend demanded, assuming a controversial attitude.

"Why shouldn't they?" I insisted, interested to draw him out.

"A statue to that thief and rascal!" he exclaimed hotly.

"It would be a disgrace to Massachusetts."

"What did he steal?" I continued my interrogations.

"Why, everything in sight—down at New Orleans."

"Do you *know* that he actually stole anything?"

"Every one knows that," he replied with conviction.

"Just what does 'every one' *know* that he stole in New Orleans?" I insisted, to see if I could pin him down.

"Why—silver spoons, for one thing; they caught him with the goods."

I am frank to say that my friend expressed an opinion of General Butler which I myself had shared until a few weeks previous to this conversation. I, too, had been brought

up with an idea that he was a "thief and a rascal." I had read the impassioned attack made on Butler in 1914 by Colonel F. S. Hesseltine, not realizing that this was the aftermath of an order issued by General Butler in 1862 to place Colonel Hesseltine under arrest as a "discontented, unfaithful, and cowardly officer." I had read the comment made by James Ford Rhodes: "This then is Butler: a general without capacity, a man without character." It is true that in his history Rhodes qualifies his estimate by admitting that "the charges against Butler can never be proved," but it had not occurred to me that an historian would state as facts anything based merely on hearsay, however general or popular that hearsay might have become.

These, and many other statements, had resulted in enrolling me among those who believed that Butler was a "thief and a rascal," and when the opportunity came for me to peruse and study the mass of Butler's unpublished private and official correspondence, I approached it with no expectation other than of having my preconceived opinion absolutely confirmed. To my intense surprise, I found the basis of the various charges to rest principally upon two vital characteristics of the man: Butler antagonized by his manner; he laid himself open to attack by his disregard of red tape. The actual charges made against him for incapacity as a general, substantiated by *partial* quotations from General Grant, were made ridiculous when the full and complete statements came to be examined. Grant himself realized this when he said to John Russell Young, afterwards United States Minister to China, "Butler is a man it is a fashion to abuse, but he is a man who has done to the country great service and who is worthy of its gratitude."<sup>1</sup>

Out of the mass of Butler's unpublished letters I have selected those which tell the story of the "silver spoons," which my friend assured me "every one" knew were "stolen." Here are the letters. They tell their own story with little editorial comment:

[Translation]

204 St. Charles Street,

New Orleans, December 17th, 1862.

To MAJOR GENERAL BUTLER, in the City.

*General:* On the 9th of August, 1862, Mrs. Ferguson, furnished

<sup>1</sup>*Around the World with General Grant*, volume II, p. 304.

with a regular pass from Head Quarters, set out to rejoin her husband and children in the interior of Louisiana, whereat landing at the Stock Ferry Landing she was arrested by police officers, stationed there by your orders, and brought back to the city under the charge of smuggling. After undergoing an investigation, Mrs. Ferguson had her person and baggage searched, and the result of these searches was to show that among the effects of this lady were two bundles of newspapers consisting of New Orleans and New York journals, all circulating freely in the city and in Louisiana with your approbation, and one bundle of silverware and spoons, which three bundles had been confided to her by Mr. Gillis. One of these bundles of newspapers was addressed to Mr. John Gillis, a French citizen and a perfect foreign neutral, residing at Woodside, La. The other bundle of newspapers and the bundle containing the silverware and spoons were addressed to Mrs. M. Gillis, residing at that time at Bayou Goula, La., 35 miles below the city of Baton Rouge, which then formed the extreme limit of your military lines.

The pass of Mrs. Ferguson, it is true, stated that this lady could carry with her her own apparel only, and the fact of her having in charge those bundles which Mr. Gillis had confided to her subjected her to reproach, as constituting on her part the offence of smuggling. The truth is, General, that Mrs. Ferguson, not knowing in her womanly simplicity the real meaning or indeed even the existence of the restriction stated on her pass, and not conceiving, moreover, that the innocent contents of those three bundles could even be considered as articles contraband of War, had not even an idea that she was thus contravening the provisions of the iron code which is here called Martial Law. Mrs. Ferguson in vain protested her good faith and her inexperience: she was nevertheless cast into prison to wait until she could be banished to Ship Island.

On the day after the arrest of Mrs. Ferguson, Mr. M. Gillis was ordered before you, and after some brief examinations, in the course of which he pleaded in vain his loyalty and good faith, he was held a prisoner at the Custom House, and three days afterwards he was banished to Ship Island without any other form of procedure.

Mr. Gillis was detained at Ship Island for 75 days, thus expiating by 82 days of actual captivity his simplicity in believing that the evidence of his good and loyal intentions might in strictness excuse the slight imprudence of which he had been guilty.

Mrs. Ferguson was set at liberty 3 or 4 days after her incarceration, and she was authorized to claim the effects of her personal property which had been seized at the moment of her arrest. Those effects, as well as the bundle of silverware and spoons destined for Mrs. M. Gillis, had been transferred from the Custom House to the house occupied by Col. Stafford on Canal Street.

Thither Mrs. Ferguson went to get back her effects, and there saw the bundle of silverware and spoons destined for Mrs. Gillis. The personal effects of Mrs. Ferguson were restored to that lady, but the bundle of silverware and spoons remained in the hands of Col. Stafford.

This bundle of silverware and spoons is my personal property, as

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will appear from the bill of sale and of lease, dated the 31st of December, 1860, and an instrument of which I produced the original and delivered a literal copy to Provost Marshal Kilburn, No. 177 Canal Street, on the occasion of an attempt made by that officer in the month of September last, to seize the house which I occupy in this city, No. 204 St. Charles Street, and to expel me from the place by main force. I will add by the way that after a ten or twelve days of faithful discussion, during which I had to undergo unjustifiable molestations, Provost Marshal Kilburn, on seeing my voucher and other proofs which I exhibited to him, deemed it prudent to give up his project of seizing my house by main force and of expelling me from my house. This being said by the way, and returning to what forms the subject of my letter, I must admit to you, General, that it was through regard only and consideration for Mrs. M. Gillis that I lent to her husband this silverware, which however, was useless to me, in order that he might place it at the disposal of his wife who wanted it. This will explain to you why and how this silverware, which is my personal property, should be in the hands of Mrs. Ferguson at this time of her arrest. After the arrest of Mrs. M. Gillis, I was waiting for a regular process in due form to be instituted against Mrs. Ferguson and Mr. M. Gillis, in order that I might myself intervene in the dispute and claim my property: for Bayou Goula being situated, as I before observed, this side of and within your lines, the sending of this bundle of silverware and spoons to Mrs. Gillis at that place no more constituted the offence of smuggling, were it looked at through a magnifying glass, than would the sending of the same bundle from my house to that of my neighbor.

That bundle circulated in the interior of the country occupied by you and subject to your jurisdiction, within the *enceinte* of even your lines, and consequently it is impossible to find in the particular case the slightest character of smuggling.

Mr. Gillis, having been released quite recently, and all ideas of regular and legal prosecution against him and against Mrs. Ferguson appearing to have been abandoned, and moreover learning today from your own official organ, the *Delta*, that you have resigned the command of the Department of the Gulf, I have the honor to write to you, General, in order to claim of your justice that you will be pleased to direct that bundle of silverware and spoons be returned to me by Col. Stafford, or by any other person who may have them in his possession at this time.

I am confident, General, that my claim will be received by you, and that justice will be rendered to it in a short time, and while the officers of your administration and Staff have not yet left the city, which will enable you to see the matter in a clear light. I venture even to believe that you will be pleased with me for thus furnishing you with an opportunity to repair an injustice, or at least to correct a serious irregularity, the responsibility for which will weigh fatally on the persons of whom your Head Quarters consist.

Deign to honor me with an answer. I have the honor to be with respect, General, your very humble and obedient servant,

A. VILLENEUVE, French Citizen.

List of Articles contained in the bundle of silverware addressed to Mr. Gillis at Bayou Goula, Louisiana, and which is my legitimate property, whose restitution I claim: 10 large Silver spoons, 8 large Silver forks, 10 large breakf't spoons, 10 large breakf't forks. Value of the whole lot from 175 to 200 dollars in coin. A. V.

This letter was received by General Butler just at the time when he was turning over his New Orleans command to General Banks. He declined to treat with M. Villeneuve, so the plaintiff turns his attention to the new commander:

[Translation]

New Orleans, December 20th, 1862.

TO MAJOR GENERAL BANKS, Commander in Chief of the Department of the Gulf.

*General:* I have the honor to transmit to you herewith a literal copy of a letter which I addressed on the 17th instant to Major General Butler, claiming the restoration of 38 pieces of silverware (silverware and spoons) which are my personal property, and which in consequence of seizure in third hands have been since the month of August last in possession of Col. Stafford of the (Native Guards). General Butler having declined to give effect to my request, I make application to you, General, soliciting from your justice the restitution to which I am entitled.

The high reputation for integrity and honor which has already preceded you in this city is to me a sure guaranty that you will deign to receive my reclamation, and give the necessary orders with a view that justice may be done to it.

My letter to General Butler, of which I transmit you a copy, contains a succinct and correct summary of the circumstances of the case, and the mere perusal thereof will certainly and entirely convince you in regard to the subject. In case, General, you should deem it proper to have an investigation made, it is desirable that such investigation should take place within a brief time, and especially before the officers of the administration of Gen. Butler put on trial shall have left New Orleans, their presence here being indispensable for the elucidation of the question.

Mrs. S. G. Ferguson, who was deprived of her buggy and horses at the same time that I was of my silverware, and to whom Col. Stafford has promised that they should be restored to her, but always in vain, proposes also in her distress to make appeal to your benevolent justice, in order to obtain the reparation which is due to her.

I have the honor to be, General, with the most profound respect, your very humble and very obedient servant,

A. VILLENEUVE, French Citizen.

General Banks failed to be deeply impressed with M. Villeneuve's appeal, and did not give to it the attention to which the aggrieved owner felt himself entitled. The next

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step was obviously to refer the matter to the Military Governor:

New Orleans, 6th of January, 1863.

HIS EXCELLENCY GENERAL SHEPLEY, Military Governor of Louisiana.

*General:* On the 9th of August, 1862, Mrs. S. G. Ferguson provided with a regular pass from the Headquarters was leaving the city to meet her husband and children in the country, when she was arrested on her way up and brought back here under the charge of smuggling.

Mrs. Ferguson was searched as well as her baggage, and the result was that among her personal effects were found two bundles of newspapers and another bundle of silverware, this last directed to Mrs. M. Gillis, of this city, living then at Bayou Goula, Louisiana, thirty-five miles below Baton Rouge, which was the extreme limit of Gen. Butler's military lines. Those three bundles had been remitted to her by M. Gillis, Esq., of this city.

After three days of imprisonment, Mrs. Ferguson was released, and allowed to claim the baggage which together with the bundle of silverware had been carried away from the Headquarters to Col. Stafford's house on Canal Street.

On leaving that place, where she had been confined, Mrs. Ferguson took with her her personal apparel only.

But her buggy and horses and also the bundle of silverware were retained by Col. Stafford, and have not so far been accounted for. That bundle of silverware belongs to the undersigned, Adolph Villeneuve, French Subject, who lent it to M. Gillis to be put by the latter at the disposal of his wife who was in want of such things.

But Mrs. Ferguson having been released with no trial at all, and M. Gillis likewise some time since, moreover, as any idea of a judicial prosecution against both of them seems to be given up, I have the honor to call to your Excellency and solicit of your justice, to order that said bundle of silverware be returned to me without any further delay by Colonel Stafford, or any other person who may be at present the holder of it. With this hope, General, I have the honor to be, of your Excellency, the most humble and obedient servant,

A. VILLENEUVE, French Subject,  
204 St. Charles Street.

List of pieces contained in the bundle of silverware above mentioned.

10 large Silver Table Spoons.	} Value of the whole lot from 175 to 200 dollars in gold.
8 large Silver Table Forks.	
10 large Breakfast Table Spoons.	
10 large Breakfast Table Forks.	

A. V.

Governor Shepley was stirred to go through certain perfunctory motions:

State of Louisiana, New Orleans, Jan. 7th, 1863.

COL. S. H. STAFFORD, Commanding 1st Regt. Louisiana Native Guards.

*Colonel:* I am directed by Gen. Shepley, Military Governor of

Louisiana, to forward you copy of letter of A. Villeneuve, herewith enclosed, with request that you will report to him the facts of the case.

Yours respectfully,  
JAMES C. SHEPLEY, Military Secretary.

January 26th, 1863.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully returned with information that this subject has been investigated by the Commdg. General, and my report to him pronounced satisfactory.

S. H. STAFFORD, Col. U. S. V.

*Endorsed:* Col. Stafford says that this silverware was delivered to Mr. Field, the financial agent of Maj. Gen. Butler.

J. C. SHEPLEY, Military Secretary.

Convinced by this time that he had uncovered sufficient irregularity to make it possible to recover from some one the two hundred dollars at which value he placed his "stolen spoons," M. Villeneuve determines to lay his case before the French Government:

[Translation]

New Orleans, March 6th, 1863.

To the CONSUL OF FRANCE at New Orleans.

*Mr. Consul:* On the 20th of December last I had the honor to write to you, transmitting to you for the purpose of deposit a literal copy of two letters dated the 17th and 20th of the same month, addressed by me, the former to General Butler and the latter to General Banks, for the purpose of obtaining the restitution from Col. Stafford of thirty-eight pieces of silverware which were seized in the hands of third parties, and which are my personal property.

My applications to those two Generals having been ineffectual, I had recourse to General Shepley, Military Governor of Louisiana, in his benevolent justice, directing Colonel Stafford to make explanation in regard to my claim.

Paying deference to this order of his superior, Colonel Stafford alleged that he delivered the silverware to Mr. Field, the financial clerk of General Butler. This answer of the Colonel is shown in writing, the document which I have the honor to transmit to you herewith.

However this may be, and admitting that the declaration of Col. Stafford is true, it is none the less true that on the records of the Quartermaster which have been examined with care, there is no mention and no trace of this silverware: from which the natural inference is that if it was really delivered by Col. Stafford to Mr. Field, the latter must have carried it away with him when he left this city in December last in the train of General Butler. In this state of affairs, I have no longer any other resource than that of claiming the support of the French Government, under the protection of which I have already placed all my furniture, effects, documents and movable value



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generally; and, therefore, I have the honor to request you, Mr. Consul, to be pleased to draw up an official certificate of my reclamation, and to add it to those of a similar character which are prosecuted at this time against the American Government at Washington, which is civilly responsible for the acts and doings of its agents. In my preceding letter of the 20th of December last is an enumeration of the 38 pieces of silverware, with an estimate of their intrinsic value made on as moderate a basis as possible. In case this silverware cannot be restored to me in kind, I ask that its estimated value, say two hundred dollars, be paid to me, not in paper money but in hard cash, either in gold or silver. For with the frightful depreciation which all kind of paper currency is undergoing in this country, it would be impossible for me to replace this silverware by paying for it in paper currency of a like amount. Herewith you will find, 1st, the copy of my letter to General Shepley, Military Governor of Louisiana; 2nd, the original letter addressed by Gen. Shepley to Col. Stafford, on the back of which the allegations of Col. Stafford are written and signed with his own hand, and the other written and signed by Capt. Shepley, Secretary to the General and Governor.

Making, moreover, all reparations for the costs, expenses and damages to which my reclamation may give rise, in order to repeat them, and to make the most of them, whensoever there may be occasion and against whomsoever it may concern.

I have the honor to be, Mr. Consul, with the highest consideration, your very humble and obedient servant,

A. VILLENEUVE, French Citizen,

Endorsed

204 St. Charles Street.

List of letters and documents furnished by Mr. Adolph Villeneuve in support of his reclamation:

1st. Copy of his letter to General Butler, dated 17th of December, 1862.

2nd. Copy of his letter to General Banks, dated 20th of December, 1862.

3rd. Copy of his letter to General Shepley, dated 6th of January, 1863.

4th. Original letter addressed to Col. Stafford by Gen. Shepley, dated 7th of January, 1863, on the back of which is in writing the allegation of Col. Stafford, one of these allegations written and signed by the hand of the Colonel and the other written and signed by Capt. J. C. Shepley, Secretary of the General and Governor.

The French Consul at New Orleans, Count Méjan,<sup>1</sup> had already come into open rupture with General Butler because he had treasonably concealed Confederate gold in his Consulate under the protection of the French flag, so his successor thought he saw an opportunity to square accounts.

<sup>1</sup>The United States Government finally demanded the *exequatur* of Count Méjan, and he was recalled by his Government

The Villeneuve documents, therefore, were forwarded to the French Minister in Washington, who, in turn, submitted the case to the Secretary of State:

[Translation]

Legation of France, in the United States,  
Washington, November 18th, 1863.

HONORABLE WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

*Sir:* A lot of silverware belonging to Mr. A. Villeneuve, a French subject residing at New Orleans, has been seized in that city by order of the Federal Officers. All the steps which have been taken with a view of having this silverware restored to the possession of the legitimate owner have up to this time been unsuccessful, and in transmitting to your Excellency all the documents relating thereto, I take the liberty of invoking your friendly attention to this affair.

Be pleased to accept, Sir, the assurance of my high consideration.

HENRI MERCIER.

The Secretary of State turns the matter over to the Secretary of War, and the following documents show the various stages of its progress:

Department of State, Washington, D. C., Dec. 4th, 1863.

HON. E. M. STANTON, Sec. of War.

*Sir:* I have the honor to invite your attention to the enclosed translation of a communication of the 18th ultimo, addressed to this Department by Mr. Mercier relative to the restoration of a lot of silverware belonging to Mr. A. Villeneuve, an alleged French subject residing in New Orleans, which was seized in that city by order of Federal Officers. I have the honor to be, very respectfully,

Yr. Obedt. Servt.,

WILLIAM H. SEWARD.

War Dept., Dec. 5th, 1863.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully referred to Maj. Gen. Banks, Commdg. Dept. of the Gulf, for investigation and report.

By order of the Secretary of War.

ED. R. S. CANBY, Brig. Gen. & A. A. Gen.

A. G. Office, December 11th, 1863.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully referred to Maj. General Banks, Commanding Dept. of the Gulf, for investigating and reporting (to be returned).

By order of the Secretary of War.

A. A. NICHOLS, Asst. Adj. Genl.

Headquarters, Department of the Gulf,  
New Orleans, Dec. 22nd, 1863.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully referred to Brig. Gen. James Bowen, Provost Marshal General.

By command of Maj. Gen. Banks.

GNAMAN LUBER, Maj. and A. A. A. G.

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State of Louisiana, Executive Department,  
New Orleans, Dec. 29th, 1863.

*General:* I do not know where Col. Stafford is. The Adj. General at Dept. Headquarters would be likely to know, as he is or was Colonel of 1st La. Native Guards (Colored).

Mr. Field, "Financial Clerk" of Gen. Butler, left the Dept. about the time Gen. Butler left. I have never heard of him since, and do not know where he resides. The assets in his hands were turned over to Colonel Holabird, Chief Quartermaster. Very respectfully,

Your obdt. servt.,

G. SHEPLEY, Military Governor of La.

Office of Pro. Mar. General, Dept. of the Gulf,  
208 Carondelet Street, New Orleans, 30th Dec., 1863.

COL. HOLABIRD, Chief Quartermaster.

*Colonel:* I respectfully enquire if there were turned over to you by Gen. Butler the following silverware:

10 Large Spoons	10 Small Spoons
8 Large Forks	10 Small Forks

The property of A. Villeneuve, a French citizen.

Respectfully,

JAMES BOWEN, Brig. Gen. & Pro. Mar. Gen.

*Endorsed:* It was never in my possession.

JOHN W. McCCLURE, Capt. & A. Q. M.

It is important to note here that Captain McClure states definitely that the silver was never in his possession. Later, it will be observed, the fact appears that General Butler holds his receipt for the property.

Headquarters, Pro. Marshal General, Dept. of the Gulf,  
208 Carondelet Street, New Orleans, January, 25th, 1864.

BRIG. GENERAL C. P. STONE, Chief of Staff.

*General:* In the case of A. Villeneuve, claimant for certain silverware, alleged to have been taken by Col. Stafford, I have the honor to report, that the silverware is not in possession of the Quartermaster, that Col. Stafford was dismissed from the service of this Department but is now, I understand, in service in another military Department, but which I cannot ascertain.

Of Mr. Field, the financial agent of Maj. Gen. Butler, I can learn nothing except that he is not in this Department. I am, General, with great respect,

Yr. obdt. servt.,

JAMES BOWEN, Brig. Gen. Pro. Mar. Gen.

Office Provost Marshal General, Dept. of the Gulf,  
New Orleans, January 25th, 1864.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully returned to Department Headquarters, with the accompanying report.

JAMES BOWEN, Brig. Gen.  
Pro. Mar. Gen., Dept. of the Gulf.

Headquarters, Department of the Gulf, New Orleans,  
Jan. 25th, 1864.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully returned to the Adj. Gen. of the Army with report of Pro. Marshal General enclosed.

N. P. BANKS, Maj. Gen. Commdg.

A. G. O., Feb. 8th, 1864.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully returned to the War Department with a report in the case.

A. A. NICHOLS, Asst. Adj. Gen.

*Endorsed:* Respectfully referred to Maj. Gen. Butler, Commdg. Dept. Va. and N. C., with the request that he direct Mr. Field to report to this Department on the subject of the property claimed by Mr. Villeneuve.

War Department, Washington City, February 11th, 1864.  
MAJ. GEN. BENJAMIN F. BUTLER.

*General:* The Secretary of War instructs me to request that, if within your knowledge, you will furnish the Department with the present address of Mr. Field, your financial agent at New Orleans, during your command of the Department of the Gulf. Very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,

E. R. S. CANBY, Brig. Gen. A. A. G.

The case is now put squarely up to General Butler for the first time, and he makes the following report:

Headquarters, Department of Va. and N. C., Fort Monroe,  
March 12th, 1864.

HON. E. M. STANTON, Secretary of War, Washington, D. C.

*Sir:* I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of certain papers referred to me by your order of the twenty-third of February last past, in regard to a lot of silverware said to belong to Mr. A. Villeneuve, an alleged French subject residing in New Orleans, which was seized in that city by order of Federal Officers, and have the honor to report thereon.

There are two classes of papers in this reference. One, a complaint by Mr. Villeneuve, through the French Minister, for the detention of his property as alleged; and the other the report of the present Commanding General of the Gulf and his subordinate as to the whereabouts of that property.

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The natural order of the consideration of these subjects will be to take the last first, because, if the property cannot be found, and if, as is alleged in the report of that officer, it still remained in the hands of my financial agent, I am responsible for it; and, therefore, should be under great inducement to make a case against M. Villeneuve in order not to be called to an account for the property. But if the property is still in the hands of the present Commander of the Dept. of the Gulf, then I shall stand as a disinterested witness on behalf of the United States, and the facts and circumstances that I report will be entitled to the credit due to such witness.

I have more than a common interest in the first branch of this inquiry, because this is not the first time I have been called upon, as well in public prints as by official papers, to account for the articles of property of great value which were left by me for the benefit of the United States (with those) who were sent by the War Department of the United States to relieve me in the command of the Dept. of the Gulf. A notable instance of this sort of accusation was an attack made in the Senate of the United States by Senator Davis of Kentucky, alleging that I had retained for my own use, and embezzled for my own benefit, the silverplate of Alexander Brother, a rebel of La., who forfeited both plate and life to an injured Government, and both should have been taken away, when at the same time I held the receipt of the proper accounting officer of that Dept. under Gen. Banks for the property, which it was alleged I had taken away. And again in this case, this plate of M. Villeneuve, which John W. McClure, Capt. and Asst. Quartermaster, has endorsed upon the report was never in his possession, was in fact on or about the 21st of December, 1862, turned over to him by my Financial Agent, David C. G. Field, Esq., and McClure's receipt as Quartermaster taken therefor by order of Gen. Banks, which receipt I now have; so that if McClure has not accounted to the proper officer for that plate, it is because he has embezzled the same, and I desire and respectfully but earnestly demand that the matter may be investigated by the proper officers.

I beg leave upon this matter to enclose the sworn report of my Financial Agent, D. C. G. Field, as part of the evidence submitted. Having now ascertained where the silverplate in question is, or at least which of the officers of the United States is responsible therefor, either to the United States or to the claimant, I have the honor to report upon the second branch of the subject, whether the plate in question ought to be given up to M. Villeneuve.

When in New Orleans I had examined this question with care upon complaint made to me, and determined upon the evidence that the plate was liable to confiscation, and had then, and have now no doubt, of the propriety of the decision.

The facts are briefly these: A Mrs. Ferguson had called upon the proper officer of the Department for a pass to go through the lines of the Union Army. It was granted, upon the express condition appearing upon the face of the pass, and explained to her, that she should take with her nothing but the ordinary articles of wearing apparel for a woman.

M. Villeneuve, who, although probably born a Frenchman, has about

the same claim to protection from the French Government that Lafitte the pirate had, resided at this time within the rebel lines, and was acting with them. Some of his property when he fled from New Orleans was left in this Mrs. Ferguson's care, for when she attempted to pass our picket this silverware was found concealed in the bottom of her buggy in which she was traveling.

She was taken before the Provost Marshal, and after a full hearing she was convicted of the attempt to smuggle it, and the property was forfeited, and ought long since to have been sold and the proceeds appropriated to the use of the United States, which certainly would have been done under a proper administration in the Department of the Gulf.

To the allegation of Mr. Villeneuve that this woman was simple, and, therefore, undertook to carry away his plate, a single observation may be made. She was a strong-minded, high-cheek-boned, and rather brazen-faced Scotch woman, who had every other attribute that might belong to a woman rather than simplicity; and the only exhibition of weakness of intellect which she showed was in entertaining the idea that she could pass the pickets with her plunder without being caught.

These facts and circumstances are very fresh in my mind, because I had very considerable trouble with the woman, for this plate was not the only property which she had.

Trusting that such investigation will be made as will require this property either to have to be paid to the United States, where it ought to go, or be given to M. Villeneuve, where it ought not to go, and that it may not be kept by McClure, who has still less right to it, I have the honor to be, very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

B. F. BUTLER, Maj. Gen. Commdg.

### Clerk Field makes the following affidavit:

Fortress Monroe, Va., March 12th, 1864.

MAJ. GEN. B. F. BUTLER, Commanding Dept. Va. and N. C.

Sir: If John W. McClure, Capt. and A. A. Q. M., who makes the endorsement on the papers, "It was never in my possession," will examine an invoice which I gave him on or about the 21st of Dec., 1862, and will let his memory serve him as to a receipt he gave to Maj. Gen. B. F. Butler, he will find that the said silverware has been in his possession. Very respectfully,

D. C. G. FIELD, late Financial Clerk, Dept. of Gulf.

Fortress Monroe, Va., March 12th, 1864.

The said D. C. G. Field personally appeared and made oath that the foregoing report by him made was true, before me.

P. H. HAGGERTY, Maj. & Act. Judge Advocate.

By this time, General Butler feels that he is entitled to be suspicious on his own account, so he writes the following letter to the postmaster at New Orleans:

## BEN BUTLER AND THE "STOLEN SPOONS" 79

Private. Headquarters Dept. Va. and N. C.,  
Fort Monroe, Va., March 13th, 1864.

MR. J. M. G. PARKER, Postmaster, New Orleans.

*Dear Parker:* When I was in New Orleans, Stafford took from a Mrs. Ferguson thirty-eight pieces of silverplate, forks, spoons, etc., which were by Field turned over to Mr. McClure, the Quartermaster.

Mr. McClure has reported to the War Department that he has not got them. I have his receipt for them. I believe that the same silver is doing duty on Banks' table to-day. I wish you would quietly have a careful examination made, and if that turns out to be true let me know. I suppose the plate is marked, but do not know what the mark is. Of course, you will not say anything about this to anybody, but take such measures as to make sure that it is there. I think the plate is not marked in Villeneuve's name, but in some other person's name (say Gillis). Write me as soon as you can learn anything about it. I have the honor to be,

Your obed. servant,

B. F. BUTLER, Maj. Gen. Commdg.

Realizing that his enemies would make the greatest possible capital out of the publicity given to the case, whatever the facts disclosed, General Butler asks permission from the Secretary of War to publish his report:

Headquarters, Department of Va. and N. C.,  
Fort Monroe, March 12, 1864.

BRIG. GEN. E. CANBY, Asst. Adjt. General, Washington, D. C.

*General:* You will do me a personal favor if you will cause the report to be read, or to be brought to the notice of the Secretary of War. I have suffered so much and so often from the denials of the receipt of articles by the officers who succeeded me and mine in the Department of the Gulf, which have left me open to unjust accusations, that I have strong feelings on the subject, and at least wish to be fully justified in the minds of my immediate superiors. I also desire that you would make a personal request to him for leave to publish this report in my own vindication. Believe me,

Most truly yours,

B. F. BUTLER, Maj. Gen. Commdg.

In view of General Banks' reports, and for the "good of the service," his request was denied, even though "the explanation is entirely satisfactory."

War Department, Washington City, March 20th, 1864.

*Sir:* Agreeably to your wish, as expressed in your communication of the 12th instant, I submitted this morning to the Secretary of War your statement in relation to the claim of Mr. A. Villeneuve, of New Orleans, who, it is alleged, lost certain silverware in consequence of its seizure by Union Officers.

In reply, I am instructed to inform you that, while the explanation

offered by your financial agent is entirely satisfactory, the Secretary does not deem it expedient at present to grant permission for the publication of your report. I am Sir, very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,  
E. R. S. CANBY, Brig. Gen. A. A. G.

The end of the episode is chronicled in a letter from Clerk Field to General Butler:

New Orleans, La., April 29th, 1864.

*Dear General:* Maj. McKee has not arrived from Red River, consequently I cannot leave here tomorrow as I had anticipated. It will take me but a very short time, however, to finish up after his arrival. I have seen McClure, who now says the Villeneuve silverware "has been in his possession," and that he sold it and accounted for it in his "abstract." He says that he made his endorsement owing to its having been marked "Gillis" instead of "Villeneuve." The Twiggs' plate, so he says, has been sold for "pure silver."

Many of your old officers here expressed a desire to be transferred to your Department.

It is stated here that Dudley, staff, and his command, ran at the first fire in the late action, Lee and Dudley have both been relieved, and are in town.

There is nothing from Red River for several days. At last accounts Banks was getting back to Alexandria. The whole thing seems to have fallen through.

You can hardly have an idea of the intense feeling for your return here, that is prevalent in New Orleans. Your reception would be such a one as must be highly gratifying to you.

All here send kindest regards to you and wish to be remembered.

Very truly yours,

D. C. G. FIELD.

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This is the real story, told by the documents themselves, of the struggle to recover two hundred dollars' worth of silverware, which covered a period of seventeen months, involved the martial Government of New Orleans and Louisiana, the Consul and the Minister of France, the United States Departments of State and War, and the outcome of which amounted simply to an unwarranted besmirching for a generation of the reputation of one of the foremost generals in the United States Army. "Every one *knows* that Butler stole spoons in New Orleans," for "they caught him with the goods"! my friend claimed with confidence. In view of the facts, one feels inclined to quote from Disraeli in referring to each one who has written against Butler: "He had but one idea,—and that was wrong."

WILLIAM DANA ORCUTT.